

## Reconciling social norms with personal interests: indigenous styles of identity formation among Pakistani youth

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**Reconciling Social Norms with Personal Interests: Indigenous Styles of  
Identity Formation among Pakistani Youth**

**Bushra Hassan & Vivian L. Vignoles,  
University of Sussex, Brighton, UK**

**Seth J. Schwartz  
University of Miami, Florida, USA**

**Authors Affiliation & complete addresses**

1. Bushra Hassan (University of Sussex)

E-mail: [bushimalik@gmail.com](mailto:bushimalik@gmail.com): Phone: +447972863439

Address: School of Psychology, Pevensey Building, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9QH UK.

2. Dr. Vivian L. Vignoles (University of Sussex)

Email: [V.L.Vignoles@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:V.L.Vignoles@sussex.ac.uk), Phone: +44 (0)1273 873635

Address: School of Psychology, Pevensey Building, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9QH UK.

3. Seth J. Schwartz (University of Miami)

E-mail: [SSchwartz@med.miami.edu](mailto:SSchwartz@med.miami.edu)

Address: Department of Public Health Sciences, Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami, 1120 N.W. 14<sup>th</sup> Street, #1073, Miami, Florida 33136, USA.

**Abstract**

Research on identity formation has been conducted mostly in Western contexts. We extend and complement such research by exploring qualitatively the strategies and styles of identity formation employed by emerging adults in Pakistan. Whereas Western theories of identity formation often provide a negative view of normative orientation as “blind obedience” without exploring alternatives, our thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 12 Pakistani emerging adults suggests a much more complex interplay between personal interests and normative influences on identity formation. Participants described various ways of reconciling normative expectations (parental, religious, and cultural) with their personal interests, preferences, and explorations, when deciding about their careers, relationships, and values. In Pakistani culture, normative influences seem to play a more positive and flexible role in identity formation than is suggested by previous Western research.

Key words: identity; culture; thematic analysis; normative orientation; Pakistan; indigenous psychologies

## **Introduction**

Much research in developmental psychology has explored the processes and outcomes of identity formation, but this has mainly been undertaken in North American and European cultural contexts (reviewed by Schwartz, Luyckx, & Crocetti, 2014; Syed, 2012). This work has often attested to the importance of active and broad exploration of alternatives in order to “find” or “create” an identity that matches one’s personal interests and preferences. In contrast, the role of normative influences has often been portrayed in more negative terms—as an obstacle to exploring personal preferences and interests (Berzonsky, 2011; Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Thus, within the primarily Western discourse on identity development, “following the rules” and identifying with significant others has often been regarded as a largely mindless and non-autonomous way of developing a sense of personal identity.

There has been a surprising lack of research into identity formation among people living in societal contexts where normativity is more culturally valued (Schwartz, 2016). We report a qualitative study exploring the processes by which emerging adults form their identities in contemporary Pakistan. Pakistan is a tightly normative cultural context that is very different from the individualistic cultures where most research into identity formation has been conducted. Gelfand et al. (2011) reported that Pakistan ranked highest in “cultural tightness” among the 33 nations they sampled, with “tightness” referring to cultures with strong norms and low tolerance for deviant behavior.

## **Theoretical Perspectives on Identity Formation**

The present research was developed as part of a wider critique (see also Hassan, Vignoles, & Schwartz, 2017) of Marcia’s (1966) identity status perspective and Berzonsky’s (1990, 2011) social-cognitive perspective on identity. However, we subsequently draw some connections with the narrative approach to identity, because of its qualitative emphasis on the issues of identity formation in cultural contexts (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006).

Elaborating on Erikson's (1950, 1968) ideas about identity, Marcia (1966, 1993) proposed that individuals could be categorized into one of four *identity statuses* according to whether they had engaged in a process of exploring alternative possible identities (identity exploration) and whether they had committed to a specific set of identity choices (identity commitment). Marcia classified exploration and commitment as "high" or "low" and crossed these dimensions to derive four identity statuses: diffused (haphazard exploration with little or no commitment), foreclosed (committed without prior exploration), moratorium (currently exploring but not yet committed), or achieved (committed following a period of exploration).

Extending Marcia's (1966) identity status framework, Berzonsky (1990) elaborated on the social-cognitive processes that individuals classified into different status categories are likely to use when processing self-relevant information, negotiating identity issues, and making personal decisions. He referred to individual differences in these processes as *identity styles*, and proposed three styles that individuals could utilize: informational (characteristic of the moratorium and achieved identity statuses), normative (characteristic of the foreclosed identity status), and diffuse-avoidant (characteristic of the diffused identity status). Broadly, according to Berzonsky's perspective, the informational style is associated with exploration and flexible commitment, the normative style with closure and conformity, and the diffuse-avoidant style with procrastination and a desire to delay making decisions for as long as possible.

### **Normative Orientation as "Automatic Processing"**

The normative orientation might be the most controversial of the three identity styles. In Western contexts, individuals adopting the normative style tend to score low on identity exploration (Schwartz, Mullis, Waterman, & Dunham, 2000). Indeed, in the latest version of the Identity Styles Inventory (ISI-5: Berzonsky, Soenens, Luyckx, Smits, Papini, & Goossens, 2013), several normative orientation items explicitly refer to lack of exploration, such as "I automatically adopt and follow the

values I was brought up with” and “I never question what I want to do with my life because I tend to follow what important people expect me to do”.

According to Berzonsky et al. (2013), commitments arising from normative orientation are relatively automatic, leaving little room for effortful exploration. Empirically, the normative orientation has been associated with need for closure, limited emotional autonomy, prejudice, intolerance and cultural conservatism (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005; Soenens, Duriez, & Goossens, 2005). People who score highly on this dimension are described as dogmatic self-theorists, whose primary goal is to maintain and conserve their self-views, and to defend their core values and beliefs against contradictory or threatening information (Adams et al., 2001; Berzonsky et al., 2013). Thus, the normative orientation is often seen as an impediment to negotiating identity related issues and as marked by automatic processing, closed-mindedness, and minimal room for deliberation.

Yet, evidence is equivocal for the presumed negative outcomes of normative orientation and foreclosed identity status. Several studies have shown that the normative style is associated positively with self-esteem and psychological well-being (Phillips & Pittman, 2007; Vleioras & Bosma, 2005). In a major US study of identity statuses and psychosocial functioning, Schwartz et al. (2011) found that foreclosed individuals showed slightly less positive well-being, but also lower levels of internalizing symptoms and no difference in health risk behaviors, compared to achieved individuals.

### **The Role of Culture in Identity Formation Research**

Identity styles are sometimes described as culturally universal, with the claim that relationships between identity styles and other variables are not moderated by culture or nation (Berzonsky, 2011; Berzonsky et al., 2013). However, the existing research has focused mainly on Western contexts (see Schwartz, Zamboanga, Meca, & Ritchie, 2012). Research on identity formation has primarily been carried out in the United States (see Schwartz et al., 2015; Syed, 2012), and in European countries (see Crocetti, Rabaglietti, & Sica, 2012; Klimstra, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2012; Seiffge-Krenke & Haid, 2012).

Relatively few studies have been undertaken in non-Western contexts, although some recent studies have been conducted in Iran (Crocetti & Shokri, 2010); Turkey (Eryigit & Kerpelman, 2009); Philippines (Pesigan, Luyckx, & Alampay, 2014); Japan (Sugimura & Mizokami, 2012); and Pakistan (Hassan et al., 2017; Tariq, 2012). In the USA and other countries where neo-Eriksonian identity research is mostly conducted, normative expectations on the individual are relatively “loose” compared to many other parts of the world (Gelfand et al., 2011). Generalizing the conclusions of this research to people living in other parts of the world may be inappropriate (Arnett, 2008; Berman, Yu, Schwartz, Teo, & Mochizuki, 2011; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2012), as such conclusions might not allow for the possibility of detecting additional or alternative identity processes that may operate in different cultural contexts—especially those where normative expectations on individuals are typically much “tighter” (Gelfand et al., 2011).

Nor can it be expected that all “non-Western” or “collectivist” cultures are alike, or else one risks theorizing about cross-cultural differences based on stereotypes rather than reality (Takano & Osaka, 1999). Based on a commonly-held dichotomous view of the world’s cultures (for a critique, see Vignoles et al., 2016), it might be expected that the informational orientation would be typical of “Western” or individualistic cultures, whereas the normative orientation would be typical of “non-Western” or collectivist cultures. However, this dichotomization leaves little room for the possibility of agency in identity formation among members of most of the world’s cultures, thereby offering a limited and potentially pejorative view of the people living in these contexts.

As emphasized within narrative approaches to identity, culture “is not something we have, it is something we do” (Hammack, 2011, p. 22). Individuals are not simply passive reflections of their culture; they are actors whose agency is both enabled and constrained by sociocultural and historical context, and whose actions subsequently combine to reproduce or transform this context (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016; Vignoles, in press). Consequently, the question arises how identity

formation is accomplished in diverse cultural contexts. Are identity styles universally applicable, as claimed by Berzonsky (2011)? If not, then what does identity formation look like in different parts of the world? Answering such questions necessitates new lines of theorizing grounded in exploratory research from a range of non-Western cultures (Schwartz et al., 2012). The current study was designed to contribute to this agenda, providing a qualitative exploration of identity formation processes and strategies within the “tight” cultural context of Pakistan (Gelfand et al., 2011).

### **Context for the Present Research: Pakistan**

Pakistan is an especially appropriate context for the present research, because it provides a marked contrast to the individualistic US culture in which the identity status and identity style models were developed. Pakistan is a relatively newly established state, created in 1947 by the partition of the former British colony of India. However, the historical impacts of Persian, Turkic, and British invasions on Indian civilization, and the consequent ethnic, cultural, geographical, and religious influences, have all shaped Pakistani identity (e.g., Alvi, 2002; Mumford et al., 1991). Islam is the official system of belief and practice in Pakistan, but Islam is not a single faith tradition (El-Zein, 1977). A major divide is between Shia and Sunni Islam, and both of these larger sects are further divided into different subsects (Ahmad, 2008), which provide conflicting religious discourses that emerging adults may be expected to identify with.

We focused our current research on Pakistani university students, which makes our sample comparable to most previous Western research on identity formation (e.g., Berzonsky et al., 2013). These youth may experience especially complex ecological and social challenges that affect their identity (e.g., Jalal, 1995; Gilani, 2005). Among the most important of these challenges are the rapid pace of urbanization (Haider & Badami, 2010) and the influx of globalization – both of which have led to changes in Pakistani culture. Increased globalization poses unique dilemmas for young people in terms of the choices they have to make regarding modern versus traditional values (Khilji, 2004).



These changes represent challenges for young people who have to evaluate what is appropriate or inappropriate within the context of competing religious and cultural values.

To date, very little research has been carried out in Pakistan addressing the correlates of and factors affecting identity. Existing research has mainly studied identity in relation to gender differences, familial relations, and their impact on well-being (Gilani; 2005; Imtiaz & Naqvi, 2012; Nawaz & Gilani, 2011; Sarwar & Azmat, 2013). However, there remains a lack of research exploring in depth how emerging adults come to form a sense of personal identity in a highly religious and culturally tight society such as Pakistan.

### **The Current Study**

Based on a stereotypical, dichotomous view of cross-cultural differences, Pakistani young people might be expected to score very highly on Berzonsky's normative orientation, reflecting an uncritical approach to identity formation. However, an alternative possibility is that Western theoretical understandings of the normative orientation are not appropriate for the Pakistani cultural context, and that the concept of normativity carries a different meaning in Pakistan than it does in the West. Notably, among Pakistani respondents, several researchers have found relatively low reliabilities for the ISI normative orientation scale compared to other identity styles (Hassan et al., 2017; Tariq, 2012). A better understanding is needed, therefore, of what it means to be "normative" in Pakistan, and what this implies for the possibilities of agency and exploration in identity formation.

We therefore adopted an exploratory, indigenous approach to provide a fresh look at the processes of identity formation among Pakistani youth. To avoid imposing Western theoretical assumptions, an inductive approach was necessary, aiming to generate new theoretical insights that might be tested subsequently, rather than testing pre-existing theories. For this purpose, an in-depth qualitative approach is optimal, and a small sample is preferred to maximize depth of analysis (Crouch

& McKenzie, 2006). Our goal was to generate new insights into possible ways of approaching the task of identity formation within a Pakistani cultural context.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

We interviewed a convenience sample of twelve Pakistani university students (6 men and 6 women, aged 21 to 24 years; 4 undergraduates and 8 postgraduates). Participants were recruited through friends and colleagues of the interviewer; none of them was personally known to her prior to the research. Eleven participants belonged to the Sunni Muslim sect, and one was Shia. These frequencies reflect these groups' representation within the overall Pakistani population (5-10% Shia, 80% Sunni). To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms (see Table 1). Interviews were held with students at the two leading public universities in Islamabad, including Quaid-i-Azam and International Islamic University Islamabad. Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, provides an amalgam of both old and contemporary trends and values, and represents a diverse set of lifestyles (Ahmed, 2008).

### **Procedure**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author in a comfortable and isolated room at each interviewee's university campus, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Previous interview studies on identity formation have often focused on three major domains of identity content: occupation, relationships, and ideology (Marcia, 1993). Inspired by this, each interview consisted of three sections, focusing on (a) decision-making while choosing a career (i.e., what process participants followed while making career and educational choices and who was involved in their decision-making), (b) decision-making regarding interpersonal relationships (i.e., with whom and when they would start a relationship, and who is involved in that decision); and (c) how they decided on the dominant beliefs and values that shaped their life choices (see Appendix for interview guide). These

three topics are of specific importance in the cultural understanding of identity formation among emerging adults because they attempt to answer whether, and to what extent, personal agency plays a role in making crucial life decisions. Following standard recommendations for semi-structured interviewing, at times the interviewer departed from the written questions in order to follow-up material emerging from the interviewees. Thus, the interviewer explored any conflict or discomfort expressed by participants while describing their experiences and thoughts. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and Urdu, which represents how many Pakistani university students express themselves. Urdu phrases were translated into English during transcription.

Ethical approval was obtained from the first and second authors' university in the UK, and from the participating universities in Pakistan. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was provided. Participants were briefed about the purpose of the study, and written informed consent was obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Respondents were assured that the data would be used only for research purposes. Finally, participants were debriefed about the purpose of the research, and were given an opportunity to request a summary of findings.

### **Analytical Approach**

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a phenomenologically-focused thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006), which explored participants' experiences of identity formation. We chose this approach to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' unique experiences and strategies when deciding on their careers, interpersonal relationships, and core values. Our analysis was also informed by recommendations for interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2004) because we hoped to gain insights into participants' lived experience of the identity formation process. This approach provided us with flexibility to probe, explore, and focus on individuals' subjective accounts of their experiences within their personal, social, and cultural contexts.

As noted by Smith (2004), such analysis is inevitably an interpretative process, involving an interaction between the interpreter and the material being interpreted. There is no assumption that another interpreter with a different personal or theoretical background would produce the same interpretation. The analysis presented is one of many possible accounts of these data. Hence, the results should be judged in terms of the persuasiveness of the interpretations offered, the transparency of the analytical process, and the extent to which the analysis generates new and valuable insights (see Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, & Craig, 2012). We illustrate our analysis with substantial verbatim quotations, giving readers an opportunity to interrogate our interpretations, so as to evaluate independently their persuasiveness. This concurrently gives “voice” to our participants, allowing readers to hear their accounts of identity formation in their own words.

In interpretive research, it is imperative to be reflexive about one’s own role as a researcher while approaching and interpreting the data (Sultana, 2007). The authors’ personal backgrounds may have affected the study in several ways: the first author’s Pakistani background and fluency in Urdu helped her to develop rapport and empathy with participants (Stiles, 1993); second, it facilitated in understanding participants’ cultural and religious beliefs while formulating their decisions; and third, it provided an advantage in understanding family dynamics within this cultural context. Thus, the first author’s Pakistani background helped in developing an “inside perspective” on the data. Nonetheless, her gender (female), advanced degree, and being older than the participants might serve as potential biases in interpretation. However, interpretations were also closely discussed with the second author during the process of identifying major and minor themes, and a consensus was developed. The second author is male and British, and thus comes from a different cultural background. He therefore provided an “outside perspective” for understanding the data. This combination of “inside” and “outside” perspectives may help to avoid some possible biases in interpreting the data.

The goal of our analysis was to focus on participants' accounts of their experiences and strategies with an open-minded approach. However, we should acknowledge that we started with a theoretical interest in exploring the relevance of ideas derived from Berzonsky's (1989, 2011) work to the Pakistani context. This prior interest, and our familiarity with Berzonsky's (1989, 2011) theorizing, may have colored our interpretations. One benefit of this familiarity is that the resulting analysis has strong generative potential to link to and enrich the existing literature on identity formation. Nonetheless the data brought to light unique dynamics of identity formation and diverse ways in which normative influences are viewed in the Pakistani cultural context—ways that we had not previously expected and that we have not seen elsewhere in the identity formation literature. Thus, the analysis has both *reflexive validity*, having changed the researchers' own understandings (Stiles, 1993) and *generativity*, offering novel and potentially valuable insights for the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Below, we introduce each theme in ways that we believe best describe the data in their own terms, rather than using theoretical labels. Theoretical implications of the themes that we identified are considered briefly within the analysis, and more extensively in the discussion section.

## Results

Table 2 provides an overview of seven themes identified during data analysis, which were clustered into three groupings. Our analysis indicated that identity formation occurs in complex and unique ways for different participants. Participants described various ways of experiencing and managing the interplay between their personal interests and the normative expectations of others, which provided a frame of reference for labeling and clustering the themes identified. The relationship between personal interests and normative influences was variously described as one of *congruence* (Themes 1-2), as a site for *negotiation* (Themes 3-5), or as a source of *conflict* (Themes 6-7). We introduce each theme below with the help of quotations illustrating the diverse processes and experiences of identity formation described by our participants.

### Congruence between Norms and Personal Interests

Participants often did not report experiencing conflict between their personal interests and external normative influences. Instead, they often suggested that social norms and personal interests were congruent, or even mutually reinforcing. This seems to contradict, at least to some extent, what might be expected given Western accounts of “normative orientation”. In some cases, participants seemed to make little distinction between normative influences and their personal interests, and could therefore be seen as *identifying with norms*. In other cases, respondents distinguished between the two, but saw *normative influences as being beneficial* to their personal interests.

**Theme 1: Identifying with Norms.** In some cases, norms appeared to be completely internalized, to the extent that participants did not report any distinction or incongruence between their personal interests and what others expected from them. For example, Marry reported using religion as a frame of reference for her decision-making:

“Religion gives you a great basic outlook on life and helps you understanding things in a spiritual manner. Spirituality comes in between which gives you the power. All of this is very important to me because it made me who I am, and has given me my identity, and I would not know who I would be if I was not a Muslim.” (Marry) [Extract 1]

Seemingly, the normative influence of religion is internalized by Marry, manifested in her identity as a Muslim, which she describes as “my identity”. Thus, her social identity as a “Muslim” can be equated with her sense of personal identity. It has “made me who I am”, and without it she “would not know who I would be”. Note that the theme of identifying with norms does not entail the absence or loss of a sense of “I” or personal identity, but rather that the “I” is defined and experienced in terms of the relevant normative content—in this case, Marry’s religious identity as a Muslim.

In a similar vein, Sara described basing her decisions on the values that she had learned and internalized from cultural norms:

“I think the values that conform to our society and religion are the values we should adopt and avoid any other thing, which is deviant from these. I value those things which are culturally and religiously appropriate.” (Sara) [Extract 2]

Sara appears to have internalized her religion and culture as her criteria for making value judgments. Like Marry, her language seems to equate social and personal identities, as she switches interchangeably between first person singular (“I value”) and plural (“we should adopt”) pronouns. Her personal values are inseparable from those of her culture and religion.

Ali reported a similarly unquestioning obedience to his mother’s decisions:

“Mother is first capital for any child, mother is the first school for everything, you never question your mother even at this point of my life I do not question my mother for any of her decisions.” (Ali) [Extract 3]

For Ali, whatever his mother says should remain “unquestioned”, and there is no sense that he is unhappy or frustrated with this (although he had a very different relationship with his father, as we show later). Anna took this a step further, apparently treating her father’s goals as equivalent to her own goals:

“It’s like studying psychology is his unfulfilled dream. So, I am trying to complete his dream.” (Anna) [Extract 4]

In some respects, this theme is consistent with Berzonsky’s (1989) portrayal of the normative orientation. Participants described conforming to expectations and acting on the values with which they were raised. In these extracts, exploration did not seem to play a significant role: “identity” was seemingly accepted and not questioned (see Berman et al., 2011, for converging evidence). From the extracts described above, it is evident that these participants are strongly influenced by norms, and that, to a large extent, they have internalized these influences. Notably, none of these participants appeared

to differentiate between norms and their personal interests: Instead, they portrayed the two as congruent, or even interchangeable, and reported making their decisions accordingly.

**Theme 2: Normative Influences as Beneficial.** Other participants did not evidence such a complete identification between normative influences and their personal values and choices. Several accounts seemed to imply a different form of normative orientation, whereby participants distinguished clearly between their own and others' decisions, but they viewed normative influences as strategically beneficial for their personal interests. Areeba described the role of her family in decision making as follows:

“I can trust my family to take decision for me and I am very confident that their choices must be far better for me than my personal choices.” (Areeba) [Extract 5]

Here, rather than equate the family's choice with her personal choice, Areeba seems to recognize that the two are separate, but she views the family's choice as superior—and in her personal interest.

Similarly, Arooj mentioned “seeking guidance” from her “spiritual mentors” in order to inform her decision-making:

“I always seek guidance from my spiritual mentors, before taking any decision. They are involved in such way, that they provide me with the best option which is most appropriate for me based upon the knowledge they are entrusted with by God.” (Arooj) [Extract 6]

Like Areeba's relationship with her family, Arooj values the guidance of her spiritual mentors above all else, because she expects them to choose the “best option” for her, and she attributes the superiority of their decisions to divine assistance.

Crucially, far from experiencing this normative influence as constraining, or implying a loss of autonomy, in two later extracts, Arooj described feeling empowered as a result of the influence of her spiritual mentors:



“My mentors helped me to understand the real purpose of head scarf, and the very feeling of identity provides me with satisfaction, strength and confidence.” (Arooj) [Extract 7]

“I have been developed as a strong personality who uses to evaluate things before adopting or start believing those. I don’t blindly follow each and everything I come across. My thinking has become more rational and logical. I have developed greater confidence and pride in what I am today” (Arooj) [Extract 8]

In both extracts, Arooj gives credit for her sense of identity and self-confidence to these normative figures who provide her guidance over spiritual matters. Crucially, following the normative influence of her mentors does not equate with being “automatic” or “never questioning”. Instead, she reports that their influence empowers her to have “confidence and pride” and helps her to be more “rational and logical”, and as a result she does not “blindly follow each and everything”. Thus, contrasting with Berzonsky’s (1990) portrayal of the normative orientation, normative influence for Arooj is far from automatic: it is embraced autonomously and strategically, because it brings benefits.

### **Negotiation between Norms and Personal Interests**

The first cluster of themes illustrated ways in which normative influences and personal interests could be experienced as wholly congruent, but this was not always the case. Participants also recognized that there could be some tension between the two, and the next three themes illustrate how participants appeared to actively and strategically negotiate this tension, finding creative ways of exploring possible identities and satisfying their personal interests without directly contravening cultural or familial expectations. Three themes capture this dynamic process of linking self and society (McLean & Syed, 2016) and provide a framework for understanding the negotiations between norms and personal interests: *exploring within normative boundaries*; *choosing which norms to follow*; and *bringing normative expectations into line with personal choices*.

**Theme 3: Exploring Within Normative Boundaries.** One way in which participants negotiated the potentially competing demands of normative expectations and personal interests was to use cultural or family norms to define the boundaries within which exploration and personal independence were possible.

Ray described how he expected to find a wife as follows:

“I think I will ask my parents to decide for me. I trust their choice and I am sure they will follow my demands. I want my parents to decide for me but I want my own choice as well.” (Ray)

[Extract 9]

In this initial extract, Ray seems ambivalent about who should actually make the decision. On the one hand, he trusts his parents to make a decision that meets his personal interests; however, he also seems concerned not to sacrifice his own autonomy. When probed about whether it is Ray or his parents who will actually make the decision, he replied:

“Parents will give me an option. I would be given a choice if I like her or not. I will go for the girl who is of my choice.” (Ray) [Extract 10]

Thus, Ray finds a resolution to the potential conflict: his parents will set the boundaries for his choice, but he will have autonomy to choose within those boundaries.

Other interviewees also described negotiating to bring their personal decisions within the boundaries of normative expectations that others or society held for them:

“In my case I have got total independence about my career and my personal life as well. They don’t stop me working in a certain way. My mother knew about my previous relationship. So I am independent but I do take into account my parents’ expectations.” (Jamal) [Extract 11]

Although Jamal likes to make his decisions independently, this independence has boundaries, as he “takes into account” the normative expectations of his parents.

In the following extract, Marry described using significant others' opinions to inform her decision-making:

“For me I would like to explore all option. I can be impulsive I can just look at the decision and say that's it I am doing that but the other person may not know this but I have looked at other options will see the pros and cons and then I would take a decision. My decision-making develops while listening to others; asking for their opinion and weigh out the pros and cons. My benefit is the most important thing to me at the end.” (Marry) [Extract 12]

In this extract, Marry at first describes “exploring all options” as if unfettered by normative expectations. However, she goes on to describe actively and explicitly seeking others' opinions, and it is their input that forms the material for her decision-making, which involves “weighing out the pros and cons” of others' opinions. Although she will ultimately follow her personal interest, it is only through “listening to others” that her decision-making “develops”. In this way, she might be described as blending aspects of the informational and normative styles, as described by Berzonsky (1990, 2011).

For these participants, normative influence does not so much constrain as *enable* identity exploration and decision-making. For both Ray and Jamal, the boundaries set by their parents' expectations seem to define a space within which they can safely explore and make choices. For Marry, normative influence—in the form of the opinions of significant others—provides the material that she explores and considers in her decision-making. In short, this theme appears to run counter to the view that normative expectations represent a barrier to identity exploration and autonomous decision-making (cf. Berzonsky, 1990).

**Theme 4: Choosing Which Norms to Follow.** The boundaries set by normative expectations are not necessarily fixed. Norms can be found at various levels, such as societal, cultural, and familial. One way in which participants described reconciling their personal explorations and interests with normative expectations was by deciding selectively which norms were, or were not, important to

follow. For example, Sheela described following the normative expectations of some, but not other, family members:

Interviewer: “Who else will be involved in your decision making?”

Sheela: “There were only family members involved, i.e., my elder brother and sisters.”

Interviewer: “How about members of your extended family?”

Sheela: “There aren’t much educated people in the rest of my family, so we didn’t take anyone else’s opinion. I only ask my immediate family for my decisions.”

[Extract 13]

Sheela elaborated on this as follows:

“The final decision would be mine, but I would love to involve my family. Because I have learned that your sister and your immediate family is the closest to you no matter how loving your extended family is. These are the only people who are going to think about you. So I would obviously take the suggestion of my family.” (Sheela) [Extract 14]

Across these two extracts, Sheela distinguishes between her “immediate” and “extended” family both in terms of their educational level and in terms of their concern for her interests. Thus, she “would obviously take the suggestion of my family” (i.e., her immediate family) whereas she and her immediate family “didn’t take anyone else’s opinion” (i.e., from extended family members). In short, Sheela trusts only her immediate family to make decisions that are in her personal interest, and thus she can follow their suggestions without experiencing a loss of autonomy.

Some participants also identified individuals outside their families as sources of normative influence. Arooj explained how guidance from her spiritual mentors was an integral influence on her decisions, whereas she gave much less weight to other sources:

“No one else is involved as such because I’m my own master and primarily care about what my mentors say. If anyone else gives me a suggestion and it strikes me, the final decision is still

taken by my mentors. And it's not that they enforce something upon me or my family, it's just that I value their advice for my decisions." (Arooj) [Extract 15]

Like Sheela, Arooj reports no loss of autonomy as a result of choosing her normative source. She stresses that "I'm my own master" and "it's not that they enforce something upon me." Even though "the final decision is still taken by my mentors," she seemingly experiences their decisions as "my decisions."

For Areeba, choosing which norms to follow involves a sharp distinction between "cultural" and "religious" obligations. In the following extract, she expressed her discomfort with certain norms that are generally practiced within the society of which she is a part, and tried to draw her own judgments about them:

"I do question my traditional values sometimes, because sometimes people can't differentiate whether they are obligated to do something culturally or religiously. For example I do believe in sectarianism but I don't like to criticize each other's sect. I do believe in gender differences but I don't believe in segregation. I don't like people too much interfering into each other's life. So I'm used to question such values which are at times suffocating." (Areeba) [Extract 16]

Similar to the preceding extract, Areeba's account shows no loss of autonomy when dealing with normative expectations. Instead, it seems, she preserves her autonomy in two ways: first, through the act of "questioning", or making her own choices between what she does or does not "believe in"; and second, by avoiding "values which are at times suffocating."

Further eroding the idea of normative orientation as automatic, passive, or mindless (cf. Berzonsky, 1990; Berzonsky et al., 2013), the extracts reported here showed participants actively deliberating and making personal choices about which norms to follow. Thus, the norms that they choose to follow are personally endorsed, rather than representing external constraints. Again,

participants did not appear to experience any conflict between following (personally chosen) norms and maintaining a sense of autonomy.

**Theme 5: Bringing Normative Expectations into Line with Personal Choices.** As well as choosing which normative influences to follow, participants could actively try to change the expectations coming from their normative sources. Several participants reported making their decisions independently and trying to convince their family subsequently to agree with the decisions that they had made. Thus, they brought their sources of normative influence into line with their personal choices, changing the norms to fit their decisions, rather than changing their decisions to fit the norms.

Unsure of her future career interests, Anna speculated that she might take this approach:

“I am not interested in anything yet [pause] if I developed an interest I will let my family know about it, and will try to convince them for it as well. I need to take my father and brother into confidence most importantly.” (Anna) [Extract 17]

Anna’s account implies that she expects to decide on her interests independently, but subsequently would want her family to accept her decision. Her mention of taking her father and brother “into confidence” indicates that the decision will be secret, and perhaps therefore easier to reverse, until she has secured approval from her closest male relatives.

Similarly, Sabeel described how he had changed his career plan and major courses in college. He described how he had made the decision by himself and had later convinced his family—also initially in “confidence”—to accept his decision:

“It was my own decision because I spent almost a year in engineering; my terminals [final exams] were quite near and [I was] prepared for nothing. I told my parents about my situation; initially they were bit shocked but they had an idea that I do not find engineering as an appropriate field and I am not interested in studying this. I have also shared it with my sisters and discussed with them that I want to change my field. After taking my parents and my

siblings into confidence, I finally decided to leave engineering and got admission in psychology. They also encouraged and supported my decision.” (Sabeel) [Extract 18]

Notably, the sequence of events is very similar to that envisaged by Anna in Extract 17: First, Sabeel makes the decision; second, he seeks normative approval in confidence from his close family members; and only when normative approval is secured does he act publicly on his decision. Later on, Sabeel also expressed his gratitude to a higher authority for the success of this maneuver: “I thank Allah for letting me change my field and that I have really selected a great field”.

This theme highlights very clearly how, in the tight cultural context in which these participants reside (Gelfand et al., 2011), the normative orientation is far from a passive and automatic process of “blind obedience” (cf. Berzonsky, 1990; Berzonsky et al., 2013), but rather involves active and strategic engagement with sources of normative influence. Anna prospectively, and Sabeel retrospectively, described a very similar process of careful, strategic negotiation, where the normative expectations of key family members are brought into line with personal choices and decisions. In this way, emerging adults can enact their independently made decisions without the risk of violating family expectations.

### **Conflict between Norms and Personal Interests**

The second cluster of themes represented several constructive ways of negotiating between norms and personal interests. Despite the various available strategies, however, successful negotiation is not always possible. In some cases, participants could not avoid normative influences that were contrary to their personal beliefs or interests. Participants reacted to contrary normative expectations in a variety of ways, with consequences ranging from rebelliousness and withdrawal—i.e., *rejecting norms*—to feelings of frustration and stress associated with *repressing personal interests* while complying with normative expectations.

**Theme 6: Rejecting Norms.** In some cases, the relationship between personal interests and normative expectations was overtly conflictual, and participants reported rejecting normative influences on their identity choices. For example, Ali described his initial compliance with, and subsequent rejection of, the normative expectations from his father and extended family members:

“I have faced excessive criticism from my father and father’s family when I went to UK for my ACCA degree and opted for odd night jobs. [...] My dad wanted me to join the army and the other option that he gave me was to join engineering. He pushed me for past 3 or 4 years after I completed my college. I initially passed the entire initial exam for army, but I was turned down because of my eyesight. Then he wanted me to enroll in an engineering university. But I told them right after the first semester that if they want me to be an engineer then I can never be satisfied. So he gave up and asked me to do whatever I want. And then I applied to UK and got admission in London and prepared for CAT and all. That was the time I was alone, no one was there at my back except my mother; because in my family either people are in forces or doing business and finance and they perceive only these fields as prestigious to be opted for. So I was not given much of options and not even asked for my choice after my college education when my future was being decided.” (Ali) [Extract 20]

Here, Ali describes having attempted two careers decided by his father. However, he eventually rejects his family’s expectations, telling them that he “can never be satisfied” as an engineer. Although his father “gave up and asked me to do whatever I want”, the tone of Ali’s account is conflictual rather than accepting, and we can speculate that Ali’s decision to study in the UK may have been an attempt to distance himself geographically from the sources of normative pressure. However, this pressure seems to have continued, as he “faced excessive criticism” even while studying in the UK. Continuing the story, Ali described the consequence as a loss of motivation for his studies:



“He [my father] forced me to drop down and I was admitted in a local college so that was the time when I really lost all interest in my education.” (Ali) [Extract 21]

Later in the interview, Ali described reacting similarly to two former relationship partners that he had experienced as controlling:

“As long as people they don’t tell me what to do what not to do I am quite fine, but when people try to drive me or direct me that’s when it becomes difficult for me to go along any further.”

(Ali) [Extract 22]

Several participants reported similar experiences and reactions to normative pressure. For example, Ray described the process of his career decision-making:

“I took this decision independently. My father is a doctor and he forced me to become a doctor but I didn’t want to be, so I insisted for what I want”. (Ray) [Extract 23]

Omer expressed a more general resistance to following normative expectations that might conflict with his personal goals:

“I am ambitious and I have set quite high goals for myself. I don’t like taking influence of the society.” (Omer) [Extract 24]

Sabeel described similar reactions:

I don’t follow others’ expectations because it’s me who is going to do something; so I know better how to do that. I generally take suggestions but I don’t like to take directions. (Sabeel) [Extract 25]

Here, in a marked contrast with Areeba (Extract 5) and Arooj (Extract 6), Sabeel emphasizes his own expertise and capacity to make the best decisions for himself: “it’s me who is going to do something; so I know better”. Sabeel’s distinction between “suggestions” and “directions” echoes Ali’s more extended description of his psychological reactance to being “forced” to do things or “not even asked for my choice” (Extract 20).

This theme highlights cases where participants rejected normative influences that were contrary to their personal interests, but especially when the normative influences took forms that they experienced as forceful or constraining. Thus, the participants' accounts in the above extracts are *anti*-normative, rather than truly individualistic, in that they portray reactance to, rather than independence from, normative influences. Notably, the participants quoted within this theme are all men, raising the possibility that available strategies for identity formation in Pakistani society may intersect with gender norms. Perhaps surrendering control to normative influences would be especially problematic for masculine identities, or perhaps rebelling against normative influences would be especially problematic for feminine identities, within a Pakistani cultural context. However, we caution against inferring a pattern of gender differences based on our sample of just six men and six women.

**Theme 7: Suppressing Personal Interests.** Normative pressures can give rise to differing responses. In Theme 6, participants took control of their decisions and resisted abiding by normative expectations that clashed with their personal choices, but this is not the only critical response to normative pressure. Faced with a subtler, “gentle” form of normative pressure, Anna described a very different set of reactions, characterized by feelings of stress, guilt, and compliance. During her interview, Anna repeatedly described how important it was for her to follow her family's expectations:

“As far as my parents are concerned, their expectations are too much important for me; to an extent that if I feel like I can't fulfil their desires and expectations I become very much stressed. I can never say “no” to them and whatever they want me to do I try to do so ultimately” (Anna)

[Extract 26]

Saying “no” to her parents seems impossible for Anna. She does not necessarily internalize their expectations, but whenever she deviates from them, she experiences greater stress. Hence, she is compliant and obedient to whatever is expected from her. When asked how she felt about this compliance, she replied:

“Most of the time I like it quite a lot, that I am obliging my parents because they are too concerned and loving to me. But at times when I share it with my friends, I feel like that it’s not only a matter of influencing your career, I think it’s about every other matter; like you have to do everything with your parent’s choice including choosing your friends, while visiting any place you need to take their permission etc. At times it annoys me, but it also vanishes off ultimately because of the realization that they love me so much.” (Anna) [Extract 27]

Whereas participants quoted in Theme 6 described using defiance to handle conflict between normative expectations and personal interests, for Anna the conflict appears to have become internalized. On the one hand, she describes her parents as highly controlling, not just when it comes to major life choices but even in the minor details of everyday life. On the other hand, she seemingly cannot acknowledge her feelings of annoyance as legitimate, because she attributes her parents’ controlling actions to the fact that they “love me so much”. Anna explained further how she could feel disempowered by her father’s “niceness”:

“Often I use to ask my father that you say that you will only tell me your liking but you do it in such a nice and humble way and afterwards you tell us to decide by yourself and can make final decision of your own choice that I am left with no choice of my own and adhere to whatever you say whole heartedly. I become persuaded by him but quite rarely I feel I need to have freedom of my own choice.” (Anna) [Extract 28]

By avoiding explicit conflict and expressing himself “in such a nice and humble way”, Anna found that she was “left with no choice of my own”, even when her father told her she could “decide by yourself”. This implicit form of “loving”, “humble” control seems to have greater power over Anna than the more forceful and overtly conflictual forms of parental control described by Ali and Jamal in earlier extracts.

Themes 6 and 7 illustrate how normative expectations can conflict with personal choices. On the one hand, several participants exhibited their rebelliousness, withdrawal, or frustration when they

were forced to do something against their will. On the other hand, others such as Anna described feelings of stress and guilt when they did not comply with normative expectations that they interpreted as loving and therefore could not question. Echoing Sabeel's comment in Extract 25, "suggestions" can be harder to resist than "directions".

## **Discussion**

Our analysis reveals some of the strategies that Pakistani emerging adults adopt for identity formation in the context of a tightly normative culture—and especially how they navigate the likely tensions that arise between exploring and expressing a sense of personal identity on the one hand, and fitting in with a context of strong normative expectations on the other hand. The processes identified through our thematic analysis diverge considerably from how Berzonsky and others (e.g., Berzonsky, 1989; Marcia, 1966) have previously conceptualized "foreclosure" and "normative orientation". Challenging previous assumptions, our analysis indicates that normative influence is not inevitably automatic, and that attending to normative expectations does not necessarily come at the expense of exploration or deliberation. Rather, we have found evidence that participants may actively explore, think and reason, and reach decisions accordingly, even in the context of Pakistan where normative expectations are very strong.

### **New Insights into Identity Formation**

Participants did not always seem to distinguish between normative expectations and their personal interests (Theme 1). In some cases, participants described normative influences as personally beneficial (Theme 2). At other times, they seemed to experience either overt or subtle forms of conflict between normative expectations and personal interests, leading to reactance (Theme 6) or guilt-driven compliance (Theme 7). Especially notable, however, were the various ways in which participants described actively and strategically *negotiating* between the potentially competing demands of normative expectations and their personal interests, so that both could be satisfied simultaneously.

These strategies included using normative expectations to define the boundaries within which they could safely explore and make choices (Theme 3), selecting which of the available sources of normative influence they should listen to (Theme 4), as well as covertly seeking to bring the normative expectations on them into line before going public with their personal choices (Theme 5). It is important to stress here that such negotiation is an active process, and is not the same as the passive compliance with norms that is so often viewed by Western researchers as associated with normative orientation (e.g., Berzonsky, 2011).

These seven themes are not mutually exclusive, nor are they a set of categories for classifying individuals. Instead, they describe ways of orienting towards normative influences that can be used flexibly and in combination, at different times and in different life domains. For example, Ali appeared to identify wholeheartedly with his mother's influence (Theme 1: Extract 3) while rejecting his father's influence (Theme 6: Extract 20); in so doing, he was also choosing which norms to follow (Theme 4). Anna seemed to identify wholeheartedly with her father's "dream" (Theme 1: Extract 4), but she also experienced her parents' "loving" form of control as a source of stress (Theme 7: Extracts 26 to 28), and she imagined bringing their expectations into line with a future career choice that she had yet to make (Theme 5: Extract 17). The complexity of these participants' identity formation strategies defies classification within a single "normative" category.

Western researchers have occasionally suggested the possibility of alternative normative processes in different cultural contexts (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001), but, to our knowledge, the current themes of reconciliation and negotiation between personal interests and normative influences have received little or no empirical attention in existing approaches to identity formation. Our analysis provides new insights into the complex processes of normative influences on identity formation, highlighting the importance of two-way relationships between norms and the self. On the one hand, norms provide a framework for thinking and for bringing one's behavior into line with cultural,

religious or familial expectations. On the other hand, normative expectations can be discredited or rejected when they conflict with personal interests, and they can also be modified.

Even in a tightly normative cultural context such as Pakistan (Gelfand et al., 2011), normative influences are malleable and are not necessarily at odds with the individual's need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Far from being passive recipients of normative influences (Berzonsky, 1989) or reflections of their cultural contexts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), our participants showed themselves to be active and strategic creators of their own identities, within the constraints of the cultural and familial niches that they inhabited. Thus, the participants in our study appeared to be showing a form of culturally-bounded agency, which is not dissimilar to the kind of individual-culture relationships that are sometimes proposed in narrative perspectives on identity formation (e.g., Hammack, 2008, 2011; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean & Syed, 2016). The themes identified here seem to reflect varying degrees of autonomy, similar to the continuum of regulatory styles described in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000): Participants variously described complying with normative expectations because they were forced to do so (e.g., Ali: Extract 20), to avoid feelings of guilt or stress (e.g., Anna: Extract 26), because they saw strategic benefits of doing so (e.g., Arooj: Extract 6), or because they fully identified their personal identity and goals with the normative source (e.g., Sara: Extract 2).

The present study extends previous understandings of the normative orientation—and of identity formation more generally—illustrating how norms may be explored, evaluated, weighed against personal interests, and ultimately accepted or rejected. Thus, the one-dimensional view of normative influences on identity formation, inherent in Western concepts of “foreclosure” (Marcia, 1966) and the “normative style” (Berzonsky et al., 2013), urgently needs extension if it is to be applied in cultural contexts such as Pakistan. In fact, we believe that this extension would also provide a fuller

understanding of identity development in Western contexts, where normative influences may be less overt but are far from absent.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The present findings should be interpreted recognizing at least two important limitations. First, the study is exploratory, and our findings would benefit from subsequent validation using quantitative methods with larger samples, as well as in other “tight” cultural contexts. Second, the present sample is small and relatively homogeneous in terms of education, age, and ethnicity, as well as their likely exposure to Western culture. It is possible that these participants may have experienced greater cultural conflict, compared to those living in regions with less exposure to Western cultural influences. Caution is therefore necessary in generalizing beyond the sample context. As is typical in qualitative research, we do not claim that our findings are representative of Pakistani emerging adults, let alone of emerging adults in other cultural contexts. Nonetheless, the study sheds light on indigenous processes of identity formation in Pakistan and suggests interesting similarities and contrasts vis-à-vis previous research in Western contexts. Our aim at this stage was not to produce a definitive and widely generalizable theory, but rather to explore the extent to which Berzonsky’s (2011) characterizations of identity formation—and especially the normative style—are indeed universal. We suggest that normativity is far more complex than Western theorists have suggested. Indeed, the complexities of identity formation in Pakistani culture suggest new insights that can expand Western theorizing.

Further research is needed to explore identity formation from a wider range of indigenous perspectives, so as to counteract the pitfalls of imposing Western theoretical understandings on people and cultural contexts to which they may not be applicable (Kim, Park, & Park, 2000). By encouraging the development and proliferation of in-depth exploratory research from diverse cultural contexts, it may be possible to understand more fully the differences, as well as the similarities, in identity processes across cultures. In this respect, our study may provide a useful step towards a more

generalizable theoretical understanding of identity formation that would be valid across a wider range of cultural contexts. In the meantime, researchers should develop measures to assess the more fine-grained theorization of identity styles and strategies identified in the present study.



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### Appendix: Interview Guideline

- 1) What are your ideas or plans about your future occupation?
  - a) Do you know yet *what* you will do?
    - i) How do you feel about this? (sure/unsure, happy/anxious, etc.)
    - ii) If you don't yet know what you will do, what do you think are the reasons for this?
  - b) *Who* was/is/will be involved in making the decision?
    - i) In what ways is this person involved? Then probe for other people: What about anyone else?
  - c) *How* was/is/will the decision be made?
    - i) Exploring alternatives? Which alternatives? How do you explore?
    - ii) What kinds of information did you look at/are you looking at/do you think you will look at? Where did/does/will the information come from?
    - iii) Were/are other people's expectations important? (If so, then which people? What sort of expectations do they have for you?)
    - iv) What else might be important? Or what else might affect the decision?
- 2) Are you in a committed relationship? (Engaged/betrothed? Married?)
  - a) What are your important considerations while indulging into this committed relationship?
  - b) How do you feel about your relationship (OR how do you feel about not being in a relationship)? (happy/satisfied/frustrated/ dissatisfied)
  - c) In your opinion what are the important aspects to strengthen a relationship?
  - d) If they are not into relationship, what factors, if any, restrain you from being in an intimate relationship?
  - e) *Who* was/is/will be involved in making the decision about whom you are committed to, or whom you will be committed to?
    - i) In what ways is this person involved? What about anyone else?
  - f) *How* was/is/will the decision be made?
    - i) Exploring alternatives? Which alternatives? How do you explore?
    - ii) What kinds of information did you look at/are you looking at/do you think you will look at in order to decide on a relationship partner? Where did/does/will the information comes from?



iii) Were/are other people's expectations important for your relationship? (If so, then which people? What sort of expectations do they have for you?)

g) What qualities you want to see in your partner?

i) What expectations do you hold for your partner in this relationship?

ii) From where these expectations come?

iii) Which partner plays a more influential role into your relationship?

iv) How do you anticipate your relationship in future?

3) What do you see as your most important beliefs or values?

a) Do you feel that "traditional" or "modern" values are better?

i) Why do you feel this way?

ii) How have you decided/do you decide what to value? How much have you thought about this question? (If yes, then describe what they thought about. If no, then what are their reasons?)

iii) Have you talked to other people, when thinking about what to value? To whom? What did you talk about?

iv) Are your values similar to those of other people who are important in your life (parents ... peers ... who else is important)? Is it important to you to hold values that are similar to theirs/different from theirs?

b) How important is religion to you, and how important do you think it is to follow religious practices?

i) From where do you get knowledge about religion? (e.g., books, society, family, scriptures, religious leaders)?

ii) Why this source is important for you?

iii) How do you feel about belonging to a particular sect?

iv) Do you belong to the same sect as your family of origin? Do you have the same religious beliefs as your parents?

v) Have you ever thought about moving to a different sect? Have you ever thought about changing your religious beliefs?

c) Do you wear traditional or modern clothing?

i) Have you always worn veil/have you always not worn veil?

ii) How do you feel about wearing veil?

iii) What factors lead you to wearing veil/not wearing veil?

- iv) Who is involved in making the decisions regarding clothing?
- v) How did you decide to wear veil/not to wear veil?

**4) Language**

- a) How many languages do you know?
- b) In which language you find yourself comfortable while communicating?
- c) What is your dominant language in academics?
- d) Which language you use the most while being with your family?
- e) To what extent you like the use of multiple languages in different context?
- f) Which language you aspire to be the dominant language into your life?